

Beyond the Foster Care System: The Future for Teens

Introduction

Selina rushed from her last college class of the day to arrive on time. Hurrying down the block, she noticed a young woman named Gloria standing on the sidewalk outside the imposing law school building. Gloria looked uncertainly at the main entrance doorway, as if unsure she belonged there.

“You here for the graduation?” Selina asked.

Gloria didn’t look surprised, but her answer seemed a bit cautious. “Think so.”

“Come on, I’ll go in with you,” Selina said with a smile. She knew how imposing the building looked to this girl, how it represented another world, although it was not that far from where either of them had grown up. As incongruous as the situation might have appeared, a supposedly troubled teenager from foster care honored and celebrated at a famous law school, it was happening in just thirty minutes.

In the polished marble lobby, Selina asked a uniformed security guard where they should go. Together they found the correct room, which had wood paneling, glass covered bookshelves, and dark oil paintings on the walls. Gloria momentarily hesitated on entering the room, and then broke into a cautious yet uncontrollable smile of pride. This was her graduation.

Soon two dozen teens surrounded Selina and Gloria. Most lived in temporary foster homes and group homes. They had survived the traumas of separation from their families, movement from one placement to another, and countless other painful experiences. One might expect they would be thankful that they were getting too old to be in foster care, but they all knew that the day was soon approaching when they would have to leave their foster

homes or group homes, and they were scared. The plans for where they would live and who would help them were, at best, shaky.

Gloria and her fellow graduates had gathered to celebrate their completion of a self-advocacy seminar we offered them. The purpose of Youth Advocacy Center's *Getting Beyond the System Self-Advocacy Seminar*[®] is to empower teens by teaching them self-advocacy. The seminar helps youth between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one understand how to critically analyze information for decision making, set goals, develop achievable plans, negotiate with adults, present personal strengths, understand the other party's needs, and give compelling written and oral presentations. During the seminar, these teens learned from a facilitator trained in the Socratic Method. They read, studied, and argued over the meaning of cases, or stories of young adults just like them who were struggling to make it in the world. They each identified a career goal for themselves, and for the final project, they had to go on informational interviews with successful professionals in their career fields of interest. Despite their tough demeanors and challenging pasts, all had successfully completed this seminar with the hope of improving their chances of succeeding at independence and reaching their dreams of success.

Naturally, the teens were excited. They usually got attention for all the things that were wrong in their lives, not for their accomplishments. Completing this seminar was an important achievement. Each week of the semester, they had complained about the workload of homework assignments, reading, and the requirement that they attend all classes. Some of this whining was an attempt to cover their fears that they would not make it through the semester; some was ordinary teenage grouching. Their caseworkers and social workers also fretted that undertaking the seminar work might lead to students facing another

devastating failure in their lives. Yet, the teens had assembled here for their graduation. They did it.

The teens in the audience stopped fidgeting and paid attention when Selina stood up to address them. She was their hero. Selina spent thirteen years of her life in foster care. Now, three years after leaving foster care, she was studying in a prestigious design college, pursuing her dream of becoming a graphic artist. The students had never met her in person but felt they knew her. They had learned about her struggle to make a future for herself through watching a video about her in one of their classes.

When Selina took part in our seminar she was quiet and thoughtful, yet insecure and unconvinced that she would succeed. Now she represented success, and her success was a compelling reinforcement for graduates. Her experiences gave them hope that they too possessed the ability to make it beyond the foster care system.

We sat back, knowing that our speeches could never have the effect of the authentic story told by Selina. We felt confident Selina would give a great presentation, even though we did not know what she would say. We remembered how a year before, Selina had been honored at an elegant fundraiser. The organization had selected her for this honor because despite the considerable challenges she faced while in foster care, she had kept her focus on her future and had successfully enrolled herself in college. At this benefit, Selina was supposed to give a speech about how our program had helped her. We eagerly waited for her to speak to the hundreds of wealthy and influential New Yorkers gathered at this dinner. When Selina stood at the podium, she began in a soft, almost tentative manner that contrasted with an underlying assertiveness that nothing would stop her from delivering the truth. The audience listened attentively. With great pride and anticipation, we were fairly sure

she would refer in glowing terms to our program and all the help we had personally given her.

“The single most important moment of my life occurred with a remarkable person....” We knew the next moment would be ours, and Selina would publicly acknowledge us for the role we had played her success. “...Al Ferugi.” We looked at each other thinking, who is Al Ferugi? “He was my informational interviewer, and he took the time to explain that I had what it takes to be a graphic designer and told me how I should begin my career. If it wasn’t for Al Ferugi, I wouldn’t be here today, and I wouldn’t be going to college.”

We looked at each other again and started laughing. Part of the strength of our program is that it is not about us, but about the students, what they want to do with their futures, and their connection to the world beyond foster care and welfare. With great satisfaction, we recognized that Selina had learned to use a range of her own resources available to pursue her goal.

For the final project of the seminar, each student at the graduation had gone on their own informational interviews with architects, designers, nurse practitioners, musicians, sports agents, anthropologists, teachers, law enforcement officers, pilots, or any other person practicing a career in which they were interested. And each had returned with stories about how that person offered them education and career advice, books, people to call, the genesis of a network to help them. Each student in the seminar gained more confidence and satisfaction by exercising their intellectual abilities in these interviews. Through such meetings, the teens’ perspectives of themselves and their places in the world change forever.

Why do teens in foster care need this kind of outside advice? Foster care teens interact with dozens of caseworkers, mental health professionals, foster parents, childcare

staff, lawyers, judges, and miscellaneous supervisors and administrators involved with their cases while they are in the system. However, they still need outside advice because even when they do establish close and important relationships in the foster care system, they always retain the nagging question of whether “I am only getting help because it’s their job, not because of my talents or who I am.” Further, teens recognize that relationships with these helping professionals are temporary—that despite their dedication and benevolence, more likely than not, either they or the teens will soon move on. This uncertainty makes teens unable to fully believe in or utilize the motivating efforts from foster care professionals. These fears explain why, even after so much individual work with Selina, Al Ferugi was the one that transformed her life because he not only provided sound advice but he was also unpaid and not part of the system.

At the graduation, Selina ended with an impassioned challenge to the graduates. “I know what you have gone through. I had some really bad times when I was in foster care. I didn’t know if I would make it, and I know others thought I wouldn’t. I know. It’s important that you decide that nothing is going to stop you.” The graduates’ pride was evident, as they sat a little straighter and smiled. The graduates stepped up to get their certificates, and their teacher told an anecdote about each student’s successes in the seminar. The students held their inexpensive certificates carefully, as if they were antique scrolls on the verge of crumpling into oblivion. Some talked about how surprised they were to complete the seminar and do so well.

We glanced at the faces of the assembled friends and some family members of the graduates. A few interested professionals from the graduates’ foster care agencies, some informational interviewers, and a number of Youth Advocacy Center supporters also sat behind the graduates. We saw many in the audience wiping away tears. They had expected

stories of challenges and hardship, and instead, they got stories of hope and witnessed dramatic transformations in the young people and in their own conceptions. At the beginning of the ceremony, some viewed the graduates as deprived kids without much hope. By the end, these images evaporated and ones of ambition, courage, resilience, and charm replaced them.

Watching the students intensified our own appreciation for their resiliency and broad range of talents. Selina's spirit gave us energy and called us to continue our work. She had endured forced separation from family and a number of temporary foster care placements, but she still continued to work toward making a successful life as a contributor to our society. We enormously respected her and all the students assembled that day. We were proud we had helped hundreds of teens in foster care over the past decade, and we felt driven to help thousands more.

We were also frustrated that we had not yet been able to change the odds for more teens leaving foster care. The graduation event reminded us how many years we had dedicated to trying to help teens from foster care escape what seemed like a prevailing sentence of failure. We had taken on what many told us was an insurmountable challenge, trying to change the foster care system and trying to help teens reach their potential. Despite our efforts and those of government officials, policy makers, advocates, and caring professionals working to help kids, too many young adults were still leaving foster care unprepared for work or college and without the means to build a life above the poverty line.

The federal, state, and local governments invest well over twenty billion dollars a year in child welfare programs.¹ Since the federal government gives the most funding for foster care, all systems must adhere to basic federal mandates, with the states and municipalities imposing additional requirements. Yet, through this system, we are creating a

continuing class of citizens that require government maintenance. The lives damaged and financial costs associated with this ongoing process are huge and detrimental to all of us.

How can this be? If there were a simple answer, someone would have solved the problem decades ago. Our work in foster care spans over fifteen years. During that time we have worked with thousands of youth in foster care, hundreds of professionals at all levels of service, administrators, government policy makers, and citizens connected or interested in foster care. From this experience, we have come to believe that significant factors prevent the system from successfully preparing youth for transition to independence.